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An example of involving lay people to enhance complex public health intervention evaluations

Poster presentation at the 16th World Congress on Public Health 2020 in Rome, Italy

Published in European Journal of Public Health

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Abstract

Background

Despite growing interest in understanding complex systems and public health interventions, research methodologies that take account of system-wide action are relatively underdeveloped. Peer-research is steered and conducted by people with lived experience of the issues being researched. This paper explores the value of peer-research in complex public health intervention evaluations. The 'Local People' and 'Local Conversations' programmes use a community empowerment approach in 50 communities across the UK experiencing social disadvantage to increase social connections and collective control, improve health and wellbeing, and reduce inequalities (linked to SDG 3 and 11).

Methods

Evaluation of the programmes followed a mixed-methods design, including qualitative case studies, longitudinal survey, process appraisal, and peer-research. Residents from 10 communities across the programmes each undertook 2 rounds of peer-research. These projects resulted in written reports, which were analysed thematically alongside other data sources.

Results

There was some variation in the scope and design of the 20 completed peer-research projects. Whilst projects did not generally extend beyond the scope of the overall evaluation, peer research provided information from residents that were inaccessible to other data collection streams. Gathering community (lay) knowledge improved understanding of local priorities and actions within the programmes. However, the utility of peer-research was less consistent for peer-researchers and local communities, often failing to support project development. Some peer researchers felt unprepared for the activity despite support from the academic team.

Conclusions

Conducted appropriately, peer research can elicit data that would be less accessible through externally led research. This study highlights the value of peer-research in complex programme evaluations, enabling a deeper understanding of social context in which interventions occur.

Main messages

Peer research complements more traditional research methodologies in complex public health evaluation designs.

Peer research can enable a deeper understanding of social processes necessary for the success of interventions that might be beyond the scope of other methodologies.